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Catholic Church's Communication in the Era of Bergoglio: Balancing Tradition and a New Leadership

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Abstract: Nowadays, several pieces of research underline the international impact of Pope Francis's messages and actions far beyond the Catholic community, especially thanks to the effects of his online presence. In the same year of his enthronement, Pope Francis was already the second most-followed leader of the world on Twitter—just behind former U.S. President Barack Obama—and he is currently the most active and followed religious leader on Instagram. But how can we understand and frame Bergoglio's media influence today? How and why did Bergoglio end up becoming a religious celebrity? This paper aims to properly answer these questions by placing Pope Francis's media resonance in a larger perspective, analyzing—together and separately—three elements that will allow us to include or exclude the reasons for his communicative success: 1. the doctrinal framework of the Church's communication, 2. the Pope's statements regarding the use of digital media, and 3. his personal communication abilities which combine with his new vision of the Church. The analysis of these elements allows us to highlight how Francis's celebrity is not due to a renovation of the social doctrine of the Church but rather to a new personal understanding of Catholic leadership.

Keywords: Bergoglio; Catholic Church; communication; leadership; Internet

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, several pieces of research underline the international impact of Pope Francis's messages and actions far beyond the Catholic community, especially thanks to the effects of his online presence (Narbona 2016; Campbell and Vitullo 2019; Cardoso and Barraco 2019; Golan and Martini 2020). In the same year of his enthronement, Pope Francis was already the second most-followed leader of the world on Twitter[1]—just behind former U.S. President Barack Obama—and he is currently the most active and followed religious leader on Instagram (Golan and Martini 2020).

A few years after his election, Pope Francis recorded the highest level of favorability among global leaders[2] with 56% of preferences; focusing on these data, 75% of preferences were registered in Latin America and 66% in the EU. More recent surveys pointed out that Bergoglio is also a positive and influential figure for six in ten U.S. adults and 63% of them have a "very" or "mostly" favorable opinion of the Pope. Bergoglio's favorability collects 82% of preferences among U.S. Catholics, and 63% among non-Catholics (Pew Research Center 2021).

His media visibility contributed to transforming Bergoglio into a real religious celebrity (Kim and Chen 2020; Lanuza 2017) and made him gain many different nicknames—"selfie Pope" (Campbell and Vitullo 2019), "criollo Pope" (Napolitano 2019), "rock star Pope" (Lanuza 2017), "the Pope is a social network" (Spadaro 2013)—which stress his extraordinary communicative power.

However, this new Pope's media resonance should not be confused with an equally important renovation of the Church's media strategies. Indeed, looking carefully at the papal declarations and documents released during his pontificate, it is clear that Bergoglio's

media presence retraces the doctrinal trajectory adopted by the Catholic Church since the appearance of the first electronic media.

2. Research Questions and Methodology

To retrace and contextualize Bergoglio's communication success today, this paper aims to respond to the following research questions:

1. How and why did Bergoglio end up becoming a religious "celebrity"?
2. How can we understand and frame Bergoglio's media influence today?

By placing Pope Francis's media resonance in a larger perspective, this paper will review through an historical and socio-qualitative perspective official Papal and Vatican documents and statements concerning:

a. The doctrinal framework of the Church's communication in the last almost 70 years;
b. Bergoglio's official positions regarding the use of media;
c. Bergoglio's personal communication abilities and qualities that contribute to creating the narrative of a "charismatic pontificate".

The analysis of these elements allows the highlighting of how Francis's celebrity is not due to a renovation of the social doctrine of the Church but rather to a new understanding of Catholic leadership.

3. Before Bergoglio: Framing Catholic Church's Approach to Media

Looking back carefully at last century's several papal documents and statements regarding information communication technology (ICT), it would be clear to see how the Catholic Church has always been a pioneer in using new technology for social and ecclesial communication. Since 1929, with the encyclical letter *Divini illius magistri*[3], Pope Pius XI placed attention on the positive and negative aspects of cinema as a tool for the Christian education of youth. A few years later, in 1931, the Pope sent the first papal radio message, inaugurating the Vatican City State Radio Station.[4]

Two decades later, in 1948, his successor, Pius XII, established the *Pontifical Commission for the Study and Ecclesiastical Evaluation of Films on Religious or Moral Subjects*, recognizing that films were emerging in popular culture on a global scale, influencing not only the artistic field but also the communication and social field. Pius XII was concerned about cinema's influence: "the thinking, the habits, the life of the countries where it develops its power—particularly among the poorest classes"[5] and, in 1957, with the encyclical letter *Miranda Prorsus*[6] he showed the reasons why the Church should be interested in modern media, explaining that both Good and Evil can be communicated and, for this reason, the Church should pay attention to the problematic developments of these means.

Almost ten years later, in 1964, Pope Paul VI in his speech at the Aloysianum Center for Automation praised those sciences and technology which pay "a sublime homage to the Holy Spirit". The Center was elaborating the electronic analysis of the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas and looking at this mechanization process, the Pope stated: "the mechanical brain comes to the aid of the spiritual brain".

During Paul VI's pontificate, the Second Vatican Council (inaugurated in 1962 by John XXIII and closed by Paul VI in 1965) represented an important turning point to theologically understand the Catholic approach to ICT (Melloni 1998). During the Second Vatican Council, the magisterial document *Inter mirifica*[7]—subtitled "Decree on the Media of Social Communication"—was emanated. In this decree, there is an express mandate of the Council for the Church to address concerns and problems in social communication conveyed by press, cinema, television, and other media (Ruozzi 2015). This document was essential for the publication of the subsequent pastoral instruction, *Communio et Progressio* (1971). In this regard, the pastoral instruction *Communio et Progressio*[8] laid the foundations for the Church's approach to the emerging potential of communication technology and its theological implication for evangelical and institutional adoption. During the Council, the *Pontifical Commission for the Cinema, Radio and Television* was renamed the *Pontifical Council*

for Social Communication (PCSC) precisely because the world was entering a new media era. This renaming occurred as the Church was dealing with new problems and with the ample opportunities created by new media (Zizola 1996). The aim of the Pontifical Council was then to address the issues of "social communications", and over the last sixty to seventy years, the Pontifical Council has contributed to the innovation of the Church itself through the publication of several papal documents which in some cases have been media-specific, such as *The Idea of Film, Ethics in Advertising*, or more recent documents such as *The Church and the Internet* and *Ethics on the Internet*.

The Second Vatican Council and the *Communio et Progressio* really opened up an intense theological discussion within the Church. The Second Vatican Council was really concerned with how the Church should monitor the use of media to see what kind of effect they were having on the spiritual wellbeing of the Church and how the Church should promote a larger reflection about the potential spiritual harm or advantages of media practices. In this frame, *Communio et Progressio*'s main aim was not so much to provide a practical guide of how the Catholic Church should endorse media, but rather to enucleate some of the core theological claims of the Catholic Church's understanding of media.

The emerging concepts were that the Church should see media as "gifts of God", that Christ is revealed as a perfect communicator—both for his practical and rhetorical style—and that media should be properly used to spread the Gospel, to contribute to the social good, and to serve the progress of man and God.

From *Communio et Progressio* and the work of the Pontifical Council, we see also the emergence of World Communication Day (WCD), which was established in 1967. With WCD, the Church really tried to draw attention to how ICT can be the key to cultural transformation, how it has an impact on the Church, and similarly, how the Church can have an impact on media culture.

Briefly summarizing: if we consider the Pontifical Council to be an instrument that provides theological and practical training for the Church—laid out by a clear theological document, *Communio et Progressio*—and the WCD a space for the popes to speak about media culture, we can now analyze how the two popes who preceded Francis addressed the challenge of new digital media.

John Paul II ascended to the papacy in the 20th Century and grew alongside phenomena such as personal computers, mobile phones, the Internet, and 24 h news coverage. He was quick to work with the Pontifical Council to adapt the Church's message to this new media environment and learn how to use new technology. One of his first attempts to address the rise of computer culture alongside mass media driven society was made in his WCD speech, in 1990, when he talked about the *Christian Message in Computer Culture*[9]. That's when the Vatican began to realize that computers were not just tools at the workplace, but that they were also involved into business and education and had a strong impact on culture as a whole. The Church needed to understand how people viewed these new tools and technology, to figure out where and how the Church needed to communicate with its public.

In 1992, in the pastoral instruction *Aetatis Novae*[10], the theme of the media as "gifts of God" returns; but the media are considered "gifts of God" only if they are used in accordance with the study and evaluation of their right use: "We affirm once again that the Church sees these media as 'gifts of God' which, in accordance with his providential design, unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with his plan for their salvation".

More than any other Pope, Wojtyla gave several noteworthy speeches related to the different technology that was emerging at his time. In 1995, John Paul was a key factor in helping to create the first Vatican website, and in 2003 he started a text message blessing service.

During this period in 1999, at the 33rd WCD[11], the Pope said two remarkable things: "The church must learn to communicate with computer culture" and then he stated: "Technology that pollutes can also cleanse, production that amasses can also distribute justly,

on condition that the ethic of respect for life and human dignity, for the rights of today's generations and those to come, prevails".

The Pope was also influential when he talked about *The Church and the Internet*[12] and the *Ethics in Internet*.[13]

In *The Church and the Internet* he discussed how the Church should respond to the Internet and he really picked up on *Communio et Progressio* where he offered guidance to Catholics on how they should position themselves on the issue of new media and how they should see their role as representatives of the Church. *Ethics in Internet* is addressed to the Church's outsiders, and implores government officials, countries, and society to use the Internet "as a gift from God", in a way that encourages communication, rather than separating people.

So again, while he offered some practical advice to the use of new emerging media, as computers and the Internet, he was really focusing on the heart of *Communio et Progressio* and the idea that communication always and wisely concerns human justice and equality.

Pope Benedict earned a reputation for being a deep theologian, committed to the study of the Church's doctrines. During the years of his papacy, Benedict dedicated several messages to ICT on the occasion of the World Communication Days: *New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship*[14] (2009); *The priest and pastoral ministry in a digital world: new media at the service of the Word*[15] (2010); *Social Networks: portals of truth and faith; new spaces for evangelization*[16] (2013).

In these documents, Ratzinger directly spoke about social network sites by stating: "The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world but is a part of the daily experience of many people". In his short papacy, Pope Benedict firmly embraced technology, as we can see from the inauguration of the Pope's Twitter account *@Pontifex*. He understood the need for the Church to embrace new technology even more, as already declared in his 2009 speech *New Technologies and Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue, and Friendship*. In that speech, Benedict asked a lot of hard questions about technology's impact on society and he really tried to push the Church to think ethically about the impact of technology and how pastoral care could be affected by it.

In 2010, in his WCD speech, he addressed not only how priests and the pastoral ministry should use media, but also how they should be trained to take up the call to do more digital media literacy in their work.

In 2013, during the WCD, Benedict stated: "Social networks are the result of human interaction, but also reshape the dynamics of communication which builds relationships. A considered understanding of this environment is, therefore, a prerequisite for a significant presence there". Just a year before, the launch of the Vatican Twitter account *@Pontifex*, the Pope's first official Twitter profile, followed this new conception of the Internet not only as a parallel, virtual world, but also as part of the daily human experience.

4. Pope Francis and Online Communication: Persistence Rather than Transformation

Success on social media is all about communication abilities. In the context of the Catholic Church, this affirmation can be demonstrated by looking at the very first tweets sent by Pope Benedict and Pope Francis. Regarding Benedict's first message, this was a formal one with a sort of television broadcast style: "Dear friends, I am pleased to get in touch with you through Twitter. Thank you for your generous response. I bless all of you from my heart"; while Pope Francis's first tweet easily seems more personable and friendly: "Dear friends, I thank you from my heart and I ask you to continue to pray for me. Pope Francis". After only one year, the Pope's communication has become more intimate and familiar, searching for a direct connection with his community through prayer and personalizing his tweets with his signature.

In 2016, the Pope's first Instagram account (*@franciscus*) was opened, and after a year it had already collected five million followers. Today, his account, with 9 million followers, is the most followed and most active of any other religious leader's account, even though Bergoglio does not follow any of his users' feeds.

As Golan and Martini (2020) highlighted, this communication strategy clearly aims to remind Instagram users of the high position of the Pope which implies subordination. This detached approach can also be illustrated by the fact that Pope Francis does not own a Facebook account. The Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) clarified this decision by condemning the predominant presence on Facebook of many "negative and vulgar" comments that risk obscuring the Holy Word: "On Twitter, however, the logic is different. You can always respond to a message from the Pope, but 'useless' or 'bad' comments are lost, they have less importance, and they can be easily ignored".[17] In conclusion, according to the CEI, Twitter is the social network of "opinion leaders" with "influential voices", a social network which makes a distinction between "official and unofficial messages" and makes "messages historical".

Probably the first official stance of Pope Francis regarding social media dates back to 2014, when in his message to the WCD—*Communication at the service of an authentic culture of encounter*[18]—he referred again to the Internet as "a gift of God" precisely for its ability to create a culture of encounter: "Media can help us greatly in this, especially nowadays, when the networks of human communication have made unprecedented advances", but also "The speed with which information is communicated exceeds our capacity for reflection and judgment, and this does not make for more balanced and proper forms of self-expression (. . .) The world of communications can help us either to expand our knowledge or to lose our bearings. The desire for digital connectivity can have the effect of isolating us from our neighbors, from those closest to us."

Anyway, in this favorable but also alarming Internet perspective, Bergoglio was also the first Pope to proclaim the first saint patron of the Internet, Carlo Acutis. Carlo was an adolescent who died prematurely at the age of fifteen, who dedicated his short life to intense work of evangelization, particularly by using digital platforms. In the exhortation, *Christus Vivit*[19] Pope Francis recalled him with these words: "It is true that the digital world can expose to isolation or empty pleasure. But don't forget that there are young people who are creative and sometimes brilliant in this area too. This is the case of the young Venerable Carlo Acutis. He knew very well that these mechanisms of communication can be used to make us become asleep subjects, addicted to consumption obsessed with free time, closed in negativity. However, he was able to use the new communication techniques to transmit the Gospel, to communicate values and beauty".

In this emerging fragile balance between the "Good and Evil" that can be both found online, the textual analysis of the papal documents made by Martini (2022) highlights that Pope Francis devoted much less space to the media communication topic and mostly spoke about it in negative terms, compared to his predecessor Benedict XVI, who frequently discussed media in positive or neutral terms.

The tension between the image of a very friendly pope who is open to the use of media communication and a pope who is attentive to the risk of an excessive and incorrect use of media was already clear in 2015, when Pope Francis promulgated a motu proprio establishing the Secretariat for Communications[20], which incorporates and coordinates the Vatican's information system. The Secretariat includes the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, the Holy See Press Office, the Vatican Internet Service, the Vatican Radio, the Vatican Television Center (CTV), the Roman Observer, the Vatican Typography, the Photograph Service, and the Vatican Publishing House (Libreria Editrice Vaticana). The new Secretariat also works together with the Secretariat of State for the direction of the institutional website of the Holy See, www.vatican.va, and the Twitter account of the Holy Father, @pontifex. Basically, instead of Vatican radio, Vatican television, and Vatican publications, there is a single dicastery that combines them, whose purpose is to oversee their work with the goal of centralizing all news media sources. The aim of joining all Vatican digital platforms together is to get rid of various layers of bureaucracy and be more integrative in the digital strategies, thus also avoiding the leaks of unofficial or fake news.Actually, fake news and disinformation have always been an urgent concern for Bergoglio, who usually does not hesitate to spend strong words against media that

spread hate: "I believe that the media should be very clear, very transparent, and not fall prey—without offense, please—to the sickness of coprophilia, which is always wanting to communicate scandal, to communicate ugly things, even though they may be true".[21] This search for unity has been made clear even by the most recent words of Cardinal Parolin in October 2022, as he was addressing the Steering Committee of the Catholic Eternal World Television Network (EWTN): "Catholic media, as you well know, have an important role in the task of the new evangelization. This is why it is good that they feel that they are an active part of the life of the Church, first of all by living in a spirit of communion with the Bishop of Rome. This is all the more urgent today in a time marked by overly dramatic debates, also within the Church, which do not even spare the person and the Magisterium of the Pontiff".[22]

In addition to the creation of the Secretariat for Communications, 2015 was also the year of the promulgation of the Encyclical letter *Laudato Sì*—in which, beyond calling for the planet's salvation, Bergoglio did not miss the opportunity to reiterate his concern about the use of digital media: "When media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply, and to live generously".

In the following years, Francis restated his position in several public speeches, such as in 2018 during the World Meeting Family in Ireland, when the Pope warned about the dangers of social media and alerted the delegates about their potential to threaten "the real web of flesh and blood relationships"; or in more recent years, when Bergoglio was asked about the role played by the Internet during the pandemic period, he stated: "The virtual meeting does not and will never replace the one in presence. Being physically present at the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, charity, looking into each other's eyes, embracing each other, being side by side in serving Jesus in the poor, shaking the hand of the sick. We know that virtual can never replace the beauty of face to face encounters. But the digital world is inhabited and should be inhabited by Christians".[23]

Despite this declaration, it should be reminded that during the pandemic, Pope Francis' *Urbi et Orbi* prayer, in March 2020, became one of the most-watched events on Italian television and on Vatican online platforms.[24]

From this brief reconstruction of Bergoglio's doctrinal approach to new media communication, we can deduct that nothing has ultimately changed from the trajectory of his predecessors, which alternates enthusiastic and concerned visions of media. Moreover, Bergoglio's media resonance cannot even be justified by his personal propensity or ability in using digital media. During an online meeting, when he was asked about the level of his digital competence, Bergoglio responded: "Yo soy un tronco con la máquina"[25]; meaning that he is completely inept with computers and unable to send even an email.

So, to finally answer the initial research question of this paper—that is: why is Pope Francis affirming himself as a celebrity among the world's leaders?—we should now look at the last aspect of Bergoglio's communication, which combines his personal communicative skills with his new understanding of charismatic leadership.

5. Beyond Catholic Church's Approach to Media: A Charismatic Leadership

In 2022, Pope Francis gave his first interview to a Sunday night talk show on Italian television. That interview was the most followed event that night and collected 672,000 interactions on social platforms.[26] During the 20 min interview, the Pope proved to perfectly fit the language of the television format: he ironically and spontaneously answered the questions; he wore the usual simple white dress with a black plastic watch. This was exactly the same interview in which Bergoglio stated that he has not watched television since 1994: "This is not because I condemn it, but it is a decision I made for the Lord when He asked me".

The language used by the Pope during the interview confirmed what other scholars had already noted (Nardella 2019; Bova 2016; Scardigno et al. 2021; McCormick 2021), namely, the simplicity of Bergoglio's communication which achieves the effect of making

his extraordinary role as pontiff more normal and familiar. This peculiar communication style obviously suits the criteria of social media communication or that of news making (Manoff 1986; Castells 2007; Hjarvard 2016): Bergoglio's words can easily be transcribed into a tweet or a meme (Sheninger 2014).

As Nardella (2019) underlines, the Pope enters a dimension of "daily life" that belongs to the individual experience of everybody. Francis consciously places himself in a dimension of "normality", showing how to use a multifaceted language to convey a sense of "humanity" through his actions and words.

This effect is achieved by using expressions and vocabulary derived from everyday life experience; Bergoglio usually breaks the ceremonial and official tone of public events with unscheduled anecdotes and jokes that recall situations close to the subjective dimension of "common" people.

Let us just consider his surprising "good evening" with which he introduced himself to the world on March 2013, or how he defined himself in his interview for the Jesuit magazine *La Civiltà Cattolica*: "I am Jorge Bergoglio, a sinner".[27]

Since his first public appearance as Pope, Bergoglio has characterized his communicative style through the "rhetoric of the unexpected" (Scardigno et al. 2021), which reinvents the distance between the community of non/believers and the Institution (Caffi 2015).

This narrative of everyday life is also clear from his personal choice: Bergoglio decided to live at the Santa Marta residence instead of the pontifical apartments in the Apostolic Palace; unlike many of his predecessors, he does not wear opulent clothing, his pope-mobile is not a Mercedes but a Jeep Wrangler[28]; and it is not uncommon to see him walking around the streets of Rome for unexpected visits, as happened in a local record store.[29]

Anyway, while Nardella (2019) calls this attitude of Pope Francis an "anti-charismatic" narration of "everyday life", other scholars (Bova 2016; Scardigno et al. 2021; McCormick 2021) emphasize how this strong personalization of Bergoglio's communication has progressively changed the focus of the Church's narrative, shifting from the visibility of the authority and centrality of the institution to the charisma of the pope's personality, resulting in the so-called effect: "more pope, less Church" (Bova 2016).

This "decentralization effect" (Giovagnoli 2015) has been evident since his first official visit to a Roman parish in May 2013, when Bergoglio traveled to the suburbs of the city, telling the parishioners, "We understand reality not from the center, but from the outskirts (. . .) the Church must step outside herself. To go where? To the borders of existence, wherever they may be".[30]

In general, Bergoglio's communication always seems to directly address the audience of believers and non-believers rather than the ecclesiastical hierarchy or other organized forms of the Catholic Church (Riccardi 2018).

This personal charismatic communication has produced an effect since the beginning of his pontificate. In 2015, an Italian survey showed that Bergoglio was appreciated by 93% of Catholics but also by a very high percentage of non-believers (67%). Moreover, the same survey highlighted that the popularity of the Pope was not followed by an equal popularity of the Church, in fact, trust in the Church was around 51%. The gap between the appreciation of the Pope and the appreciation of the Church has never been so wide, and Francis reached the highest consensus among Popes in the last 30 years of pontificates.[31]

As Ivereigh (2019) argues in the Jesuit magazine *America*, it is clear that in the last decades, Christianity has been returning to the call of the: "primary encounter not dependent on law, culture or powerful institutions but on the testimony of love and the power of the Spirit". This was also the discernment that Pope Francis stressed in *The Joy of the Gospel*[32], where the Holy Spirit (mentioned 49 times) is the main protagonist.

In this sense, we are also witnessing an intensification of the relations between the Holy See and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. In a world where the predominance of the Catholic Church has declined from 90% in the 1960s to 69% in 2014, with two-thirds of those leaving having joined new charismatic Christian movements[33] (Pew Research Center

2015), the launch of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal International Service (Charis) in 2018 is clearly a signal of a new project that Bergoglio has for his Church.

In fact, the Pope who came from the "extreme borders" of the South of the world already knows that Latin America has been the laboratory of the charismatic phenomenon, which is impossible to ignore in order to analyze and understand the dynamics and directions of Christianity today (Nogaro and Tanzarella 2016). As archbishop of Buenos Aires, Bergoglio was one of the most convinced supporters of the ecumenical reconciliation for the legitimization of the charismatic renewal groups and since 2003, for example, he has participated in the annual event promoted by the charismatic Catholics and the Pentecostal Evangelicals, the Encuentro Fraterno de Comunion Renovada de Evangélicos y Catolicos en el Espiritu Santo[34] (CRECES) (Naso 2019).

In Economy and Society (1978), Weber posits three forms of legitimacy for authoritarian figures: traditional, bureaucratic-legal, and charismatic. Weber views charisma as a quality of an individual personality by which he/she is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with exceptional powers or qualities. Charismatic leadership, meanwhile, was viewed as a highly effective form of authority emerging in times of trouble that may lead to social change.

Before the enthronement of Pope Francis, the Italian sociologist Pace (2012) had already anticipated the future challenge for the Church of Rome, namely, dealing "with people that chose to believe without being content to be born in a religion" (2012, p. 255). In this case, Pace affirms that another kind of Church would be the response: "the mystical and charismatic, which does not need large institutional apparatuses nor rely on elitist vanguards of the faith" (2012, p. 255).

Considering this theoretical and historical reconstruction of Bergoglio's communication, its success does not fall into a disruptive Bergoglio's vision of the fundamental tenets of the social doctrine of the Church, but rather the Pope is proposing a new idea of leadership (Rusconi 2017). He is offering a consistent message and an openness of approach which perfectly fits the new media context (Martino and Ricucci 2016) and seems to be the winning formula for reaching out to a new audience, which can be also a non-Catholic or even a non-believer audience.

Golan and Martini (2020)—studying the representations of the Pope through Instagram images—define this new leadership of Francis a "distant charismatic leadership"—and considering the arguments put forward till now, we argue that this definition could also be extended to the general perception of Bergoglio's authority, which combines the normalization of the Pope's language with his adherence to the doctrine of the religion that he represents. As the authors explain, this distant charismatic leadership is created on Instagram through images that emphasize the Pope's presence in the life of believers, while providing transcendental meaning through the images of the Pope in contemplation or performing religious rituals. The gestures and the words of Bergoglio convey the proximity of a Gospel message that wants to concretely accompany people's lives, as Bergoglio himself put it clearly in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*[35]: "all the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization".

This evangelical radicalism of the Pontiff recalls the model of the early Church, a Church of small communities geographically distant from the Center.

A Church led by a Pope who the Cardinals "come almost to the ends of the Earth"[36] to get him and which is obviously contaminated by the cultural and political history of his home country (Monda 2022; Borghesi 2018; Scannone 2016).

This new mission overturns the vision of the pontiffs who recently preceded him, namely affirming what the Church is. After all, Bergoglio seems to be more focused on what the Church should be.

However, even if this new leadership of Bergoglio is clearly appealing to the formats of media communication and their audience, the real challenge today lies within the Roman

Curia and this challenge involves leading the institution without losing any piece along the way.

6. Final Remarks about a Controversial Leadership

In this effort of giving an exhaustive and complete framework to the way Bergoglio's celebrity can be explained and contextualized in the media and leaders' scenario today, the dissent encountered by Pope Francis during the years of his "alternative" pontificate should also be considered.

The original and charismatic personality of Bergoglio has indeed raised polarized positions around his figure, which sometimes go beyond the religious and political sphere and also involve the academic one. The difficulty to suspend enthusiastic or negative judgment about Bergoglio's mandate poses a threat to the validity of an objective reconstruction of his actions. As is the case for any celebrity, the debate around Bergoglio mobilized two opposite factions: fans on one side and detractors on the other.[37]

Moreover, the global reach of Francis' papacy has raised equally global criticism, and the opinion groups critical of the pontificate have been able to organize themselves both with old and new media.[38]

Dissent against the Pope is especially rooted in the most conservative Catholic but also non-Catholic groups, in which the voices of the US Republican Party and its voters are the most resonant.[39] During Bergoglio's pontificate, these groups have exacerbated their historical standpoints (Faggioli 2017) to jeopardize Bergoglio's authority (for instance their claim to deny communion to pro-abortion politicians, or their support of the death penalty). More recently, they have also strongly opposed the ecological principles expressed in the Encyclical *Laudato Si*[40], or those expressed in the *Amazon Synod*[41], accusing Bergoglio of endorsing a religious syncretism and of being too theologically progressive (Raven 2016).[42] While, on the other side, other Liberal groups accuse Bergoglio of being too populist, as happened with the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*[43] (Zanatta 2020; Pedrioli 2017; Li et al. 2016).

On the ecclesial level, the initiatives that found opposition were notably the two Synods for the Family, which ended with the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, in 2016. This text has been and continues to be debated especially with regard to footnote 351 of Chapter VIII in which the possibility of admitting people living in irregular situations to the Eucharist is mooted.[44]

After this document, internal opposition to Pope Francis was consolidated in the *Dubia*, a long list of critical remarks published by four cardinals[45] in 2016 (Franco 2021).

In a less formal way, dissent to Bergoglio is also expressed online by the same groups through their websites, which obviously resonate on social media.[46] An interesting case study is the Twitter account of the Pontifical Academy for Life[47] (PAV), founded by Pope John Paul II in 1994 and renewed by Pope Francis in 2016. The work of the PAV addresses some of the most crucial ethical questions concerning human life and, in 2016, Bergoglio approved PAV's new statute, broadening the discussion on several topics such as abortion, euthanasia, and other medical and technological issues that have an impact on life (biotechnology, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, robotics). As it could be noticed from the complexity of the issues covered by the PAV, this institution is also extraordinarily exposed to "hate storms", which strike its Twitter account according to the news media agenda[48] and which also involve the Pope, as happened for example on the occasion of his pro-vaccine stance (Mastrofini 2022).[49]

Regardless of the success or failure of this new leadership, Bergoglio's exceptional media resonance today is undeniable. As we saw, this great visibility relies on a long history of engagement and theological reflection on media technology by the Catholic Church, which oscillates between the awareness of the potential offered by new media and the cautious push toward innovation. Anyway, during Bergoglio's era, this doctrinal approach encountered the resonance of a new charismatic leadership, which is sometimes more disruptive in its form rather than in its content.

Anyway, as Weber (1978) underlined: the charismatic appeal of this form of authority does not last long if this power is not prolonged by a "routinization of charisma" through which the leader's teachings can be canonized as texts, values can be transformed into laws, and personal authority can be transferred to depersonalized roles.

Even if it is still too early to predict whether this will be the impact of Bergoglio's pontificate, it is unquestionable that today, thanks to Francis's leadership, the Church of Rome is already something different from what we were used to.

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Notes

1 See Glatz C. (2013). Pope is most influential, second most-followed world leader on Twitter. The National Catholic Report, Available online: https://www.ncronline.org/news/culture/pope-most-influential-second-most-followed-world-leader-twitter (accessed on 17 November 2022).

2 See Gallup International (2017). *Two Global Leaders with Very Different Global Perceptions*, Available online: https://www.gallup-international.bg/en/36714/two-global-leaders-with-very-different-global-perceptions-2/ (accessed on 10 November 2022).

3 See: *Divini Illius Magistri*, Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/it/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121929_divini-illius-magistri.html (accessed on 24 November 2022).

4 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIW61g829ZA

5 See: *Apostolic Exhortations of His Holiness Pius XII to Representatives of The Cinema World* (Audience of 21 June 1955), Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-xii_exh_25101955_ideal-film.html (accessed on 24 November 2022).

6 See: *Miranda Prorsus*, Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_08091957_miranda-prorsus.html (accessed on 24 November 2022).

7 See: *Inter Mirifica*, Available online: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19631204_inter-mirifica_sp.html (accessed on 24 November 2022).

8 See: *Communio et Progressio*, Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_23051971_communio_it.html (accessed on 24 November 2022)

9 See: *Christian Message in Computer Culture*, Available online: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/ documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_24011990_world-communications-day.html (accessed on 10 November 2022).

10 See: *Aetatis Novae*, Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_22021992_aetatis_en.html#Nota%2033 (accessed on 24 November 2022).

11 See: *Mass Media: A Friendly Companion for Those in Search of the Father*, Available online: https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_24011999_world-communications-day.html (accessed on 10 November 2022).

12 See: *The Church and the Internet*, Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html (accessed on 24 November 2022).

13 See: *Ethics in Internet*, Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html (accessed on 24 November 2022).

14 See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.html (accessed on 24 November 2022).

15 See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20100124_44th-world-communications-day.html (accessed on 10 November 2022).

16 See: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20130124_47th-world-communications-day.html (accessed on 10 November 2022).

17 See: *Tutorial WeCa. Papa Francesco sui social: perché è partito da Twitter?* Available online: https://www.ceinews.it/2019/02/06/tutorial-weca-papa-francesco-sui-social-perche-e-partito-da-twitter/ (accessed on 30 November 2022).

[18] See: *Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter*, Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html (accessed on 24 November 2022).

[19] See: *Christus Vivit*, Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html (accessed on 10 November 2022).

[20] See: Pope Francis creates new secretariat overseeing all Vatican communications, Available online: https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/32235/pope-francis-creates-new-secretariat-overseeing-all-vatican-communications (accessed on 30 November 2022)

[21] The Pope's interview for the Belgian Catholic weekly, *Tertio*. See: https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/12/07/161207a.html (accessed on 30 November 2022).

[22] Holy See Press Office, Address of Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin—EWTN dinner Villa Tuscolana (Frascati), 19 October 2022. See: https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2022-10/cardinal-pietro-parolin-ewtn-gala-dinner-full-speech.html (accessed on 30 November 2022).

[23] See: *Come abitare da Cristiani il mondo digitale*, Available online: https://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/2022-06/quo-139/come-abitare-da-cristiani-il-mondo-digitale.html (accessed on 30 November 2022).

[24] The prayer reaches more than 2 million views on the web and 64% of the television audience. *The prayer for the end of the pandemic beats Sanremo and Montalbano* was the title of the Italian Episcopal Conference magazine, L'Avvenire. See: https://www.avvenire.it/chiesa/pagine/papa-benedizione-urbi-et-urbi-coronavirus-record-ascolti-tv-17-milioni (accessed on 10 November 2022).

[25] "Tronco" is a colloquial Spanish expression to say "dumb". See: *El Papa reconoce que es un desastre con la tecnología*, Available online: https://www.reuters.com/article/oesen-papa-tecnologia-idESKBN0LA0S820150206 (accessed on 10 November 2022)

[26] See: Papa Francesco fa il pieno di ascolti a "Che tempo che fa": 6,731,000 spettatori, 25.4% di share, Available online: https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2022/02/papa-francesco-fa-il-pieno-di-ascolti-a-che-tempo-che-fa-6731000-spettatori-254-di-share-057263f6-e5ee-4bff-8a9a-49aa211cc665.html#:~:text=Papa%20Francesco%20fa%20il%20pieno%20di%20ascolti.,social%20oltre%20672%20mila%20interazioni (accessed on 10 November 2022).

[27] See the full interview by Antonio Spadaro: *Intervista a Papa Francesco*, Available online: https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/SPADARO-INTERVISTA-PAPA-PP.-449-477.pdf (accessed on 24 November 2022).

[28] See: Woods B. (2015). Pope Francis Global Leader. *George Town Business Magazine*. Available online: https://msb.georgetown.edu/news-story/pope-francis-global-leader/ (accessed on 30 November 2022).

[29] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HL6Pl_hs83s (accessed on 30 November 2022).

[30] See: The Leadership of Pope Francis. *Catholic Outlook*, Available online: https://catholicoutlook.org/the-leadership-of-pope-francis/ (accessed on 10 November 2022).

[31] See: La Chiesa di Bergoglio: sondaggio in occasione dell'apertura del Giubileo. *Demopolis*. Available online: https://www.demopolis.it/?p=2490 (accessed on 30 November 2022).

[32] See: Ivereigh A. (2019). Francis our first charismatic Pope. *America*, Available online: https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/06/14/francis-our-first-charismatic-pope (accessed on 10 November 2022).

[33] The Catholic Charismatic Renewal is rooted into the so-called *Malines documents* published between 1974 and 1986, which substantially call for a urged the Renewal to see the gifts of the Holy Spirit as at the service of Christian unity and social justice, not just evangelization and personal conversion. See more one Available online: https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/05/30/pope-francis-calls-upon-catholic-charismatic-community-work-justice (accessed on 10 November 2022); Available online: https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2019-06/charis-a-new-service-for-the-catholic-charismatic-renewal.html (accessed on 10 November 2022); Available online: https://www.vaticannews.va/it/chiesa/news/2022-04/charis-rinnovamento-carismatico-maratona-preghiera-pace-ucraina.html (accessed on 10 November 2022); Available online: http://www.ccr.org.uk/articles/pope-francis-and-ccr-five-years-of-grace/ (accessed on 10 November 2022).

[34] As it will be outlined in the next paragraphs, this position has cost Bergoglio much criticism on the part of conservative Catholic groups who accused him of apostasy.

[35] See: *Evangelii Gaudium*, Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed on 24 November 2022).

[36] See Transcript: Pope Francis' First Speech as Pontiff, Available online: https://www.npr.org/2013/03/13/174224173/transcript-pope-francis-first-speech-as-pontiff (accessed on 30 November 2022).

[37] At this regard see the debate provoked in Italy by the publication of the book: *Il populismo gesuita: Perón, Fidel, Bergoglio* by the scholar Loris Zanatta (2020).

[38] See: Mastrofini M. (2020). Chi sono e cosa vogliono i nemici di Bergoglio, quelli che maledicono gli altri in nome di Dio. *Il Riformista*. Available online: https://www.ilriformista.it/chi-sono-e-cosa-vogliono-i-nemici-di-bergoglio-quelli-che-maledicono-gli-altri-in-nome-di-dio-169572/ (accessed on 23 November 2022); Mastrofini M. (2020) *Critiche a Bergoglio frutto di interessi*

economici più che teologici. Il Riformista. Available online: https://www.ilriformista.it/critiche-a-bergoglio-frutto-di-interessi-economici-piu-che-teologici-97327 (accessed on 23 November 2022).

[39] The harshest criticisms come from a homogeneous sector led by «EWTN network», basically a TV Channel with the online magazines: *National Catholic Register* and *Lifesite*, in connection with the Italian blog *Settimo cielo* and other Italian websites (*La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana* and *The Van Thuan Observatory*, the blogs *Stilum Curiae* and *Duc in Altum*), connected with other US websites (*Churchmilitant* for instance) and the Spanish *infovaticana*.

[40] See: *Laudato Sì*, Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed on 24 November 2022).

[41] See: *Wealthy conservative Catholics are the new US Magisterium*, in «National Catholic Reporter», Available online: https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/wealthy-conservative-catholics-are-new-us-magisterium (accessed on 30 November 2022); *Editorial: Money shapes the US Catholic narrative*, in «National Catholic Reporter» Available online: https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/editorial-money-shapes-us-catholic-narrative (accessed on 30 November 2022).

[42] See: Tremamunno M. (2019). Il posto della Pachamama è all'inferno. *La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana*. Available online: https://lanuovabq.it/it/il-posto-della-pachamama-e-allinferno-ecco-perche-ho-bruciato-quellidolo (accessed on 30 November 2022).

[43] See: *Fratelli Tutti*, Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (accessed on 24 November 2022).

[44] See: *Amoris Laetitia*, Available online: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html#_ftn351 (accessed on 24 November 2022).

[45] Raymond Burke, Carlo Caffarra, Walter Brandmüller, Joachim Meisner, these cardinals publicly asked for clarifications on doctrinal matters, contesting especially the passage in chap. VIII on the readmission of the divorced to communion with the Church.

[46] See the footnote n.37 and the websites: www.ncregister.com; www.lifesitenews.com; https://magister.blogautore.espresso.repubblica.it/; www.lanuovabq.it; www.vanthuanobservatory.org/; www.marcotosatti.com; www.aldomariavalli.it; www.churchmilitant.com; www.infovaticana.com (accessed of 30 November 2022).

[47] See: https://twitter.com/PontAcadLife (accessed on 30 November 2022).

[48] See: Allen J. (2022). Latest row at Academy for Life raises question of purpose restraint. *Crux*. Available online: https://cruxnow.com/news-analysis/2022/07/latest-row-at-academy-for-life-raises-questions-of-purpose-restraint (accessed on 30 November 2022); Allen E. (2022). Vatican's Academy for life stirs fresh controversy with new member. *Crux*. Available online: https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2022/10/vaticans-academy-for-life-stirs-fresh-controversy-with-new-member (accessed on 30 November 2022).

[49] In 2021, during the meeting with the Jesuits from Slovakia in Bratislava, when Bergoglio was asked how he deals with people who look at him with suspicion, his answer was: "I personally may deserve attacks and insults because I am a sinner, but the Church does not deserve this: this is the devil's work". Bergoglio did not mention it but he was attacked by the US EWTN television.

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